

“Trim the Tree”

Advent 2023, part #1

Mark 13:24-37

[Title slide] Waiting for Christmas is hard, isn't it? This year, the wait is even longer. Normally we have four weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas, but this year there are five.

Even now, most of us are waiting for the next few minutes. What are we doing here? Why does it look like a Christmas garage sale? The answer is, we are about to decorate our church for Advent and Christmas. Before we do, I would like to offer you an explanation.

[Woman smiling at decorations] What is the point of decorating, not just for Christmas? Why do we make places ready for weddings, parties, and holidays? The answer is probably obvious. To make it look nice for a special occasion! We want people to feel something, a “wow!” moment, when they step into the room. Our decorations communicate the value we place on what is about to happen.

The season of Advent reminds us that we are waiting for Jesus to return. He might come tomorrow, or in a 100 years. No one knows. Jesus tells us, in Mark 13:32, we are not to speculate.

[Christmas tree and falling star] Nevertheless, we are supposed to actively wait for him. It's a bit like waiting for falling stars. Sure, there might be a meteor shower forecast, but you don't know the exact moment you will see one. So you prepare the best you can: find a dark spot, lay out a blanket, and look up. My personal recommendation is to put both the cellphone and the dog away; both are terribly distracting while you're watching for falling stars.

Part of the reason we decorate today is to help us focus on Jesus and not be distracted. I want to highlight three traditional Christmas decorations, so we can remember why we are doing this. Specifically, the wreath, the garland, and the tree.

[Wreath] First, the wreath. Psalm 24:7 says, “Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the Ruler of glory may come in.” In Revelation 3:20, Jesus says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone

hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me."

The door is the entrance to the places we live, work, and worship. Placing a wreath reminds us, as we open our church doors to receive guests and neighbors whom we love and serve, we also need to open our hearts to receive Jesus.

[Garland] Next, we have the evergreen garland, spread on the prayer rail and the balcony. Evergreens symbolize repentance and forgiveness, and God's faithfulness and integrity. God says in Hosea 14:4&8:

*"I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely,
for my anger has turned from them.*

It is I who answer and look after you.

I am like an evergreen cypress; your faithfulness comes from me."

[Evergreens] And in Isaiah 41:18-20:

*"I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
and the dry land springs of water.*

*I will put in the wilderness the cedar,
the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive;*

*I will set in the desert the cypress,
the plane and the pine together,*

so that all may see and know,

all may consider and understand,

that the hand of the LORD has done this,

the Holy One of Israel has created it."

Everywhere we see green, we are reminded of God's love and provision.

[Christmas tree] Finally, we turn to the Christmas tree. This tradition was brought to America by German immigrants. Legend says that Martin Luther was outside one winter night, and he was so impressed with the stars of God's creation, he decided to put candles on a tree inside the house, to share with his family the beauty he beheld.

There are specific symbols we place on the tree today. The star at the top represents the Christmas Star, the sign that proclaimed the birth of the Messiah and brought the Magi to Bethlehem (Matthew 2).

[Chrismons] The other ornaments are called Chrismons. We hang symbols and signs of Christ, our ruler, prophet, and priest. We hang stars, crosses, triangles, the "alpha" and the "omega" to remind us of his identity, his story, and the Holy Trinity.

Revelation 22 invokes many of these names.

"See, I am coming soon ... I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." (22:12-13)

"It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." (22:16)

[Girl under a tree] As we wait for Christmas and for Jesus' return, we can prepare ourselves. Putting up decorations is easy; preparing our hearts takes more time. Colossians 3:12 says we are to "clothe ourselves...with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Those are our "ornaments." As you decorate today, I pray that God places those values in your life.

[Title slide] Today, we do more than make the church look pretty. We prepare ourselves for Christmas, for Christ himself. We prepare this place for our guests, some of them who don't know Jesus yet. We pray for all the services that will take place here in the next few weeks, including the Quiet Christmas and Candlelight services. We pray for opportunities to share the gospel invitation, to offer communion. We pray for our missions and our ministry. We decorate this place so that God can get the glory.

Don't look at these next moments as just a job, or a funny idea from Pastor, or some gimmick. View them as an opportunity to live out your faith. Say a prayer with your team. Pray as you assemble, hang, and decorate. Ask the Holy Spirit to whisper to you, "I'm coming to you. Be ready." Ask Jesus to come into your heart like never before. Use this time to meditate on the full meaning of Christmas, the Incarnation, God coming as a human among us.

Now, go and get this place ready for Jesus!

Memory Verse: Colossians 3:12

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."

Reflection Questions:

1. What is your favorite Christmas decoration? Why? Does it have anything to do with the story of Jesus' birth?
2. Whom do you expect to come to church this season? Why? How are you prepared to receive them?
3. How do you plan to focus on serving others during this season that is often focused on commercialism?
4. Have you asked Jesus to come into your heart and your life? Have you “decorated” yourself with his values?